

Bracing for Collapse

Abbas Loses Control in PA Areas



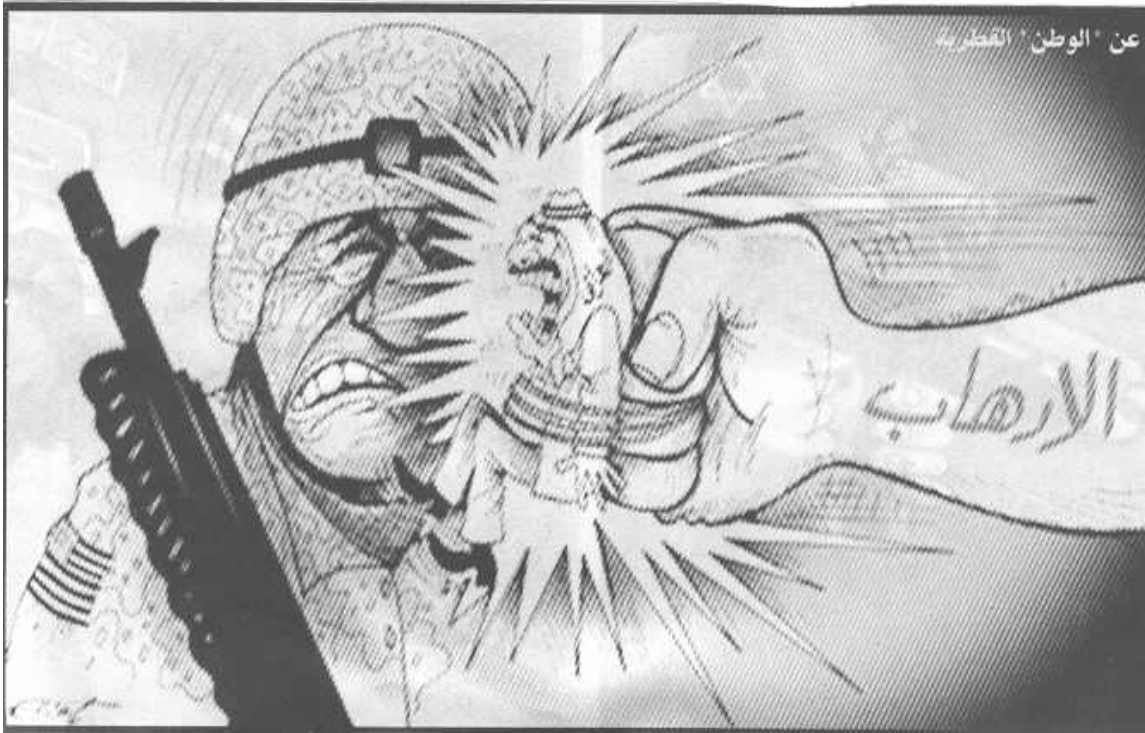
Al Hayat Al Jadida, June 16, 2005

Executive Summary

The Palestinian Authority is quietly bracing for the prospect of collapse amid the unprecedented violence by members of the ruling Fatah movement. PA leaders have acknowledged that they cannot stem the chaos in Palestinian areas or count on the loyalty of the police and security forces, in many cases bolstered by Western aid and training. Indeed, the PA reports that many of the gun battles that rage through Palestinian cities have included security officers who have joined Fatah operatives in extortion and other criminal activities. Rather than order an offensive, PA leaders have sought to appease Fatah factions and offer them jobs and housing while promising security commanders that they would delay or revise plans to reform the security services. At the same time, senior PA officials have used the official media to blame Israel for the violence and recycle canards used before the Palestinian war in 2000.



Al Quds, June 7, 2005



Al Hayat Al Jadida, June 11, 2005

Abbas Loses Control

Outwardly, the Palestinian leadership has been engaged in preparations for Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and northern West Bank and the acquisition of hundreds of millions of dollars in Western aid. But the leading topic in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and reflected in PA-controlled newspapers, has been the loss of control by PA Chairman Mahmoud Abbas and the defection of security commanders and their forces to militias established by the ruling Fatah movement. These days, militants from Abbas's own party threaten the chairman, his aides and virtually anybody who fails to cooperate. In muted but clear tones, the PA newspapers report daily the attacks by Fatah, often bolstered by security officers, against PA officials, their families and security installations.

PA officials have been fleeing or plan to leave the West Bank for Jordan and other Arab states. The most popular Palestinian daily, Al Quds, [1] has been jammed with ads by travel agencies, a remarkable development considering the poverty of most Palestinians, their lack of passports and other Israeli restrictions. The ads are for the Palestinian elite, who are looking to escape the dangers of living in Palestinian cities. Indeed, the assessment by many is that the PA could collapse by late 2005 as the split within the ruling Fatah movement widens. PA security services have been unable to stem the increasing violence in the streets of Palestinian cities in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Fatah factions have been engaged in gun battles in Ramallah, the center of Palestinian government, while police have largely stood by or even joined in.

Much of the reporting in the PA media has been oblique. Reports of attacks on PA installations or officials have been taken from international news agencies in an effort to avoid

the targeting of Palestinian reporters by Fatah gunmen. Many of the attacks are reported in condemnations by prominent residents or by Fatah offices. [2] Editorials in PA dailies have expressed deep concern over the shootouts and attacks on PA officials and installations, but rarely point fingers. Indeed, most of the time Israel is to blame. [3]



Al Hayat Al Jadida, June 14, 2005



Al Hayat Al Jadida, June 9, 2005

Internal Violence Marks Greatest Threat

Slowly, columnists and PA advisers have made it clear that Abbas's loss of control represents the greatest threat to the regime and Fatah, which have become indistinguishable. They reflect the fear within the Palestinian leadership as well as among ordinary Palestinians and stress the lack of confidence in Abbas. The assessment is that Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and northern West Bank would only exacerbate the violence in Palestinian cities and embolden Fatah gunmen and their allies in the PA security forces. As one leading commentator put it, "I don't see how we're going to gain control over the [Gaza] settlements, if we can't control the Fares Market [in Gaza City]." [4]

Indeed, even PA leaders have no longer sought to hide the extent of the crisis. PA Prime Minister Ahmed Qurei [5] warned that he would suspend the Cabinet unless the security forces were ordered to halt the chaos in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Qurei, however, has blamed Israel for 90 percent of the violence and established a panel to oversee efforts to restore order. At the same time, he warned that the gun battles between Palestinian gangs did not constitute resistance to Israel.

Qurei has blamed the lawlessness in the PA areas on the failure of the leadership to take any decisions. Qurei warned the security personnel to either act as police or step down and stressed that the government would no longer be able to carry out its duties amid the chaos.

"If no end is put to the security violations which are taking place, this government will not be able to carry out its responsibilities," Qurei said. "We cannot tell our people that we are responsible when fire is opened on the citizens and their property is attacked. These violations have sometimes reached the extent of murder." [6]



Al Hayat Al Jadida, June 10, 2005

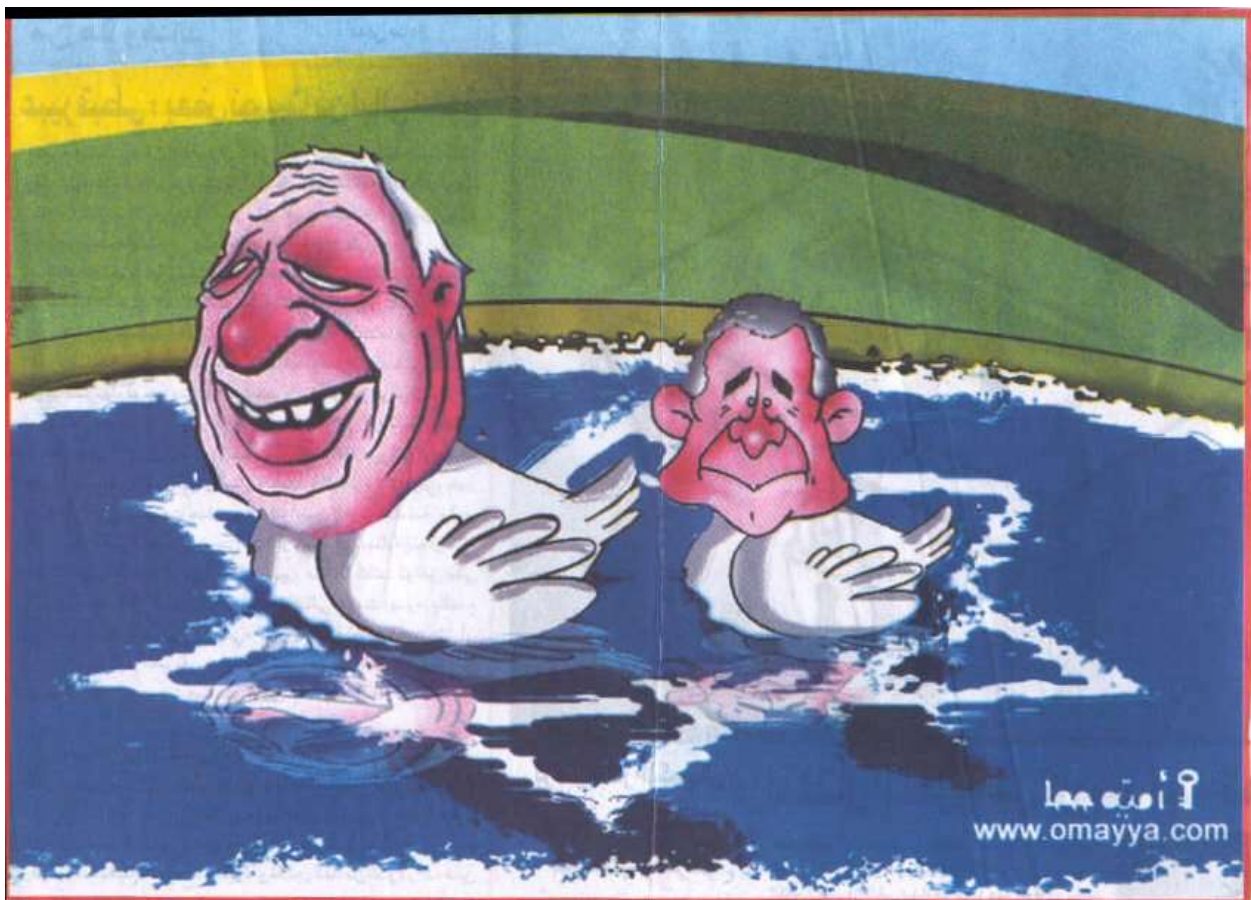
Qurei has threatened to arrest and even execute law-breakers. He pointed to the PA execution of four people in the Gaza Strip on June 12 in a move approved by Abbas. At the same time, the prime minister admitted that much of the lawlessness was the work of the very police responsible for maintaining order. The PA has nearly 50,000 police and security forces and Qurei acknowledged that they were not doing their job.

Step Up or Step Down

"We also tell the security services that we will not allow any violations whatsoever and every official must shoulder his individual responsibility," Qurei said. "Any official who fails to hold those accountable for their actions must step down. Also anyone who rebels must step down. We cannot remain silent."

Hours after Qurei's address on June 15, the prime minister faced the wrath of the Fatah movement. About 40 Fatah gunmen, many of them wanted by Israel for attacks, stormed Qurei's winter home in the West Bank town of Jericho. Qurei was not home. The gunmen said the PA had reneged on its commitment to supply them with jobs and housing. [7] Instead, the PA stopped paying the Fatah insurgents.

Qurei suggested that the PA leadership was under threat from Fatah. He indicated that he and other senior PA officials were unable to carry out their official duties out of fear of the Fatah gangs. [8] As of June 15, 19 Palestinians have been killed in the internal violence in PA areas during 2005. [9]



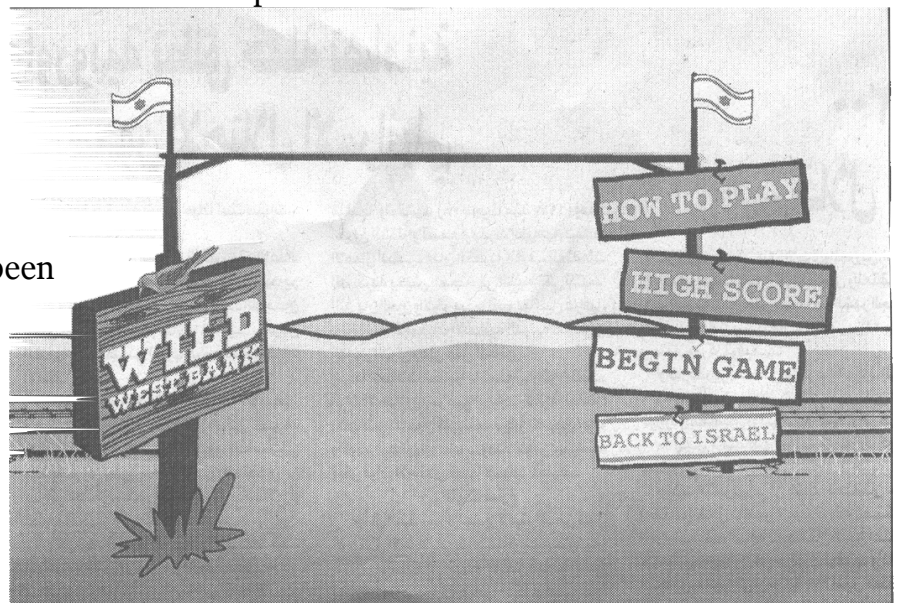
Al Hayat Al Jadida, June 7, 2005

Cop as Criminal

The PA has acknowledged that many police and security officers spend their time playing criminal rather than cop. The official PA media have reported the involvement of security officers in gun battles in Ramallah on June 12. The media also reported the killing of three people in the Gaza Strip on the same day. On June 11, about 40 gunmen attacked PA security headquarters in Gaza City and waged a three-hour gun battle with officers in the facility. Later, Fatah operatives opened fire near the home of a senior Palestinian commander, Brig. Gen. Rashid Abu Shback.

Moreover, several explosions in bomb-making laboratories were reported in the Gaza Strip town of Khan Yunis. In the Jabalya refugee camp, a PA police officer was abducted. The media did not report the arrest or prosecution of suspects.

Increasingly, the Palestinian media have been voicing concern by Fatah figures of a collapse of law and order that would sweep all the political gains of the PA. The media have been quoting prominent Palestinians who speak of an atmosphere of terror. Palestinian dailies focused on the killing of four members of a Palestinian family in Gaza City.

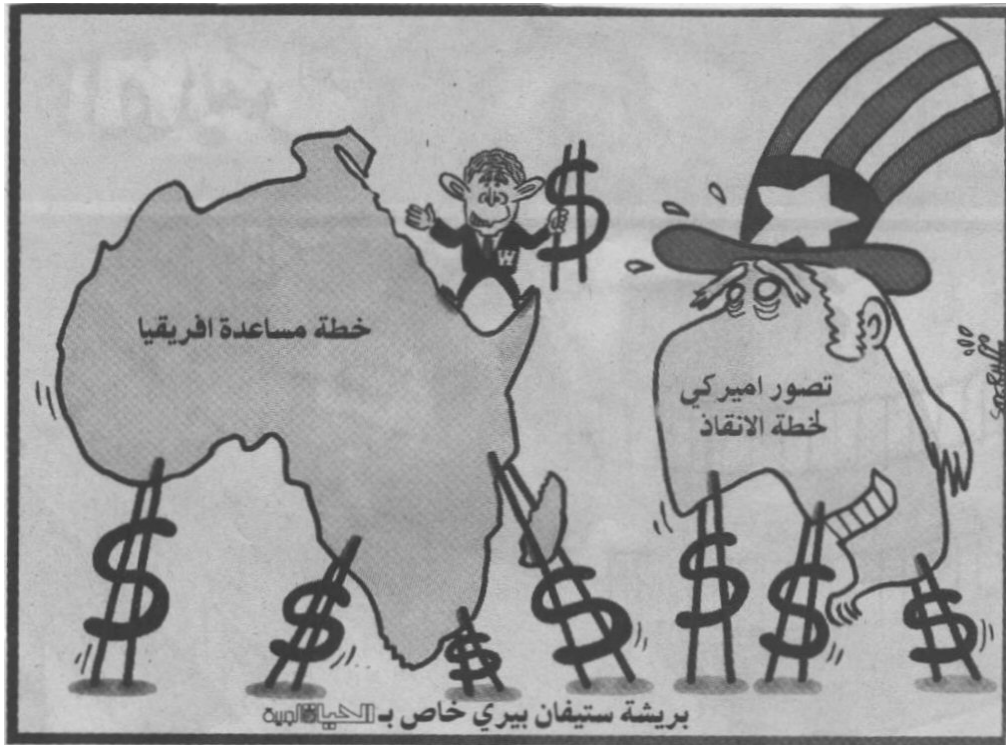


Al Quds, June 16, 2005

The Interior Ministry said unidentified gunmen stopped the car, shot three of its passengers dead. Later, a fourth Palestinian was also found to have been abducted and killed. Despite condemnations, the PA failed to indict anybody. [10]

"Armed thugs who are roaming our streets are imposing a reign of terror and intimidation on the public," Abdul Sattar Qassem, who ran for the position of PA chairman in January 2005, said. "Palestinians today are afraid to speak out for fear that they might alienate the thugs. Some are even afraid to honk the horns of their cars for fear of being shot or beaten."

"In Nablus and Ramallah you sometimes see people on the streets fleeing for their lives while members of rival gangs are shooting at each other. And who are these thugs who are destroying our security? They are members of the security forces or people who are on the Palestinian Authority's payroll or their friends and relatives." [11]



Al Hayat Al Jadida, June 8, 2005

Money is Not the Issue

Abbas as well as the PA leadership, however, has ignored the urging of ordinary Palestinians for order. PA security commanders have insisted that the violence reflected feuds between powerful families. Brig. Gen. Ali Hosni, head of security in the Gaza Strip, however, acknowledged that the spate of killings and attacks have created a state of chaos in the Palestinian territories. [12]

Senior PA security officials have pointed to the need for more weapons and equipment for the Palestinian security forces. But PA-financed commentators have not endorsed this call. Indeed, one commentator said Abbas raised the salaries of PA police by 20 percent in 2005. He also replaced all of the senior security commanders. This, however, has not stemmed the disloyalty of PA security forces. [13]

PA Encourages Insurgency Arsenals

Instead, Palestinian leaders have tried to appease Fatah and other insurgency groups. First, Abbas postponed Palestinian Legislative Council elections, scheduled for July 17, after Fatah warned that it would lose to Hamas. That appeared to set off a wave of Fatah-inspired violence in the PA territories. PA Foreign Minister Nasser Al Qidwa said the Cabinet could function even under threat from Fatah factions. Al Qidwa, regarded as close to Abbas, said Fatah and other Palestinian insurgency groups must continue to carry weapons until what he termed the end of the Israeli occupation. He said the PA would not collect weapons from Palestinian militants until Israel ended its occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. In his words, "The peace plan [roadmap] backed by the United States calls for ending the occupation, and according to the international law, as long as the Palestinian territories are occupied, the Palestinians have the right to resist."

Not surprisingly, Hamas hailed Al Qidwa's statement. [14] Hamas spokesman Mushir Al Masri said the movement would not abandon what he termed resistance. He said Hamas would not dismantle its military wing and that any statements to the contrary were baseless. [15]

Deputy Prime Minister Nabil Shaath echoed Al Qidwa's assertion. He denied that the PA was committed to collecting weapons from Palestinian groups. He acknowledged that the roadmap contained Israeli and Palestinian requirements, including the disarming of insurgency groups. But he said the PA has linked any such move to the implementation of Israeli



Al Quds, June 7, 2005

commitments. "Such a commitment can be found in the text of the roadmap plan for peace, but this commitment was postponed until Israel recognizes the plan and dismantles settlements and stop constructing the separation wall," Shaath said. [16]

Abbas, who has been meeting Palestinian insurgency leaders, also issued a decree to free Islamic Jihad operatives suspected of planning a suicide bombing outside a Tel Aviv nightclub on Feb. 25. Jihad leaders said the movement reached agreement with Abbas for the release of the Jihad operatives, who had been detained in a PA prison in Jericho. Under the accord, the operatives would remain in Jericho until Israel withdrew from Kalkilya, the hometown of the Jihad members. [17]

Abbas's aides have raised the prospect of a reshuffle of the current Cabinet and restructuring of the Interior Ministry. Under one proposal, the ministry would be split into two. One would deal with national security and the other with interior security. Yusef, who appears to have lowered his profile over the last few weeks would be responsible for the civil police and

Amin Al Hindi, the former head of PA General Intelligence, would be appointed chief of the security services. [18]

Abbas Leaves Vacuum

Abbas's inaction has also left a political vacuum, increasingly filled by his opposition. Palestinian politicians announced a new political part termed Kaffa, or "Stop," apparently inspired by the pro-democracy Egyptian organization of the same name. [19] The Palestinian movement said it would fight PA corruption as well as chaos in the PA areas. The movement has also demanded the establishment of elections promised by Abbas. So far, the PA chairman has not set a new date of legislative elections. Indeed, the absence of democracy has been felt in many PA institutions. Six members of the Palestinian National Initiative have resigned, citing what they termed "the absence of a democratic atmosphere" in the organization.

The Palestinian People Party has called for the establishment of what it termed emergency committees to resolve disputes in the PA areas. The emergency committees were set up during the Palestinian uprising in 1988 and replaced when the PA was established six years later.



Al Ayam, June 14, 2005

Looking for a Scapegoat

The response of the PA leadership has been to divert the frustration of the people toward Israel. Taking a leaf from Guantanamo, the PA accused Israeli prison guards of destroying a Koran and flushing it down a toilet. Chief PA Islamic judge Sheik Yasser Tamimi said Israeli guards desecrated the Koran in two incidents in June. The PA official pledged to bring this up in an urgent meeting of the Organization of the Islamic Conference. Israel has insisted that no such incident took place

Desecrating our holy book is provocative, not only to the Palestinian Muslims, but also" to all Muslims all over the world," Tamimi said. "Carrying out such action is scheduled and programmed against the Koran, against Islam and against all Moslems in the world. I believe that what happens against the Korean is to test the Muslim reaction and see how big this [reaction or this protest in case Al Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem is attacked or demolished]." [20]

At the same time, PA officials reiterated a long-held canard that Israel was poisoning the Palestinian people. PA Environment Minister Yusef Abu Safiya, in a repeat of charges made before the outbreak of the Palestinian war with Israel in 2000, said Israel has flooded the Palestinian market with fruit juice filled with carcinogens. Abu Safiya told the Palestinian legislature that Israeli companies have been using an unidentified dangerous substance in fruit juices since 1982. [21] He said PA security forces have seized shipments of both Israeli juices and biscuits filled with poison. "Such kinds of goods are specifically produced for the Palestinian consumers in the Gaza Strip," he said

Abu Safiya said, Egyptian authorities seized two Israeli trucks that were filled with toys that contained radioactive substances and carcinogens. He said Palestinian merchants were bribing judges to allow the import of the Israeli goods and criticized judges for not banning these products. The minister warned that the Israeli products could lead to an environmental catastrophe in the PA areas



Nowhere is the power vacuum felt more than in the PA-owned media. The days when the dailies featured the statements of the PA chairman on the top of page one have ended. The days of printing the picture of the PA chairman on page one are also gone. Abbas is not Yasser Arafat. Instead, Abbas is often absent from the front page, and when photographed often appears befuddled. Prime Minister Qurei appears to be often on the front page as much as Abbas.

Slowly Abbas Becomes Marginal

Indeed, the commentators in PA-owned dailies are finding it harder to defend what they acknowledge is the increasing withdrawal of Abbas from Palestinian leadership. They cited Abbas's decision in early June to postpone PLC elections that had been scheduled the following month. The decision was meant to save Fatah from a drubbing by the opposition Hamas movement and give the ruling party enough time to reorganize. Instead, Abbas's reversal of his original position that the elections would be held on time was interpreted within Fatah and the PA as weakness of the chairman. The PA chairman even failed to win the consent of his rival, Fatah chief Farouk Khaddoumy, to agree to become vice chairman and succeed Abbas. [22]

"President Mahmud Abbas's decision to postpone the legislative elections, which were supposed to take place on July 17, was only the last event in a series of delays and evasions that rendered the postponement inevitable," columnist Talal Okal wrote in defense of Abbas. "But accusing the president of making the decision of postponement based on partisan politics to give Fatah more time to salvage its state of affairs couldn't be further from the truth. The most important issue now is for the PA and all its agencies to assert its clear and decisive determination to complete the democratization process and to declare new dates [for elections] through a serious and responsible dialogue with the factions." [23]

But the promise by Abbas to immediately schedule a new date for PLC elections has dissipated. Abbas has linked the setting of a new date of election to a new election law, a process that is not assured in the near-term. Abbas's defenders emphasize that despite his pledge for elections as late as



Al Quds, June 15, 2005

March 2005 new conditions have emerged that complicate matters in the Palestinian political arena. It has become clear to Abbas supporters that PLC elections won't be scheduled before the end of 2005. [24]

"What happened in Cairo was an insufficient effort to conduct a dialogue on the election process, especially considering the complicated political conditions," PA commentator Adli Sadiq writes. "However, the postponement of the legislative elections, even indefinitely, is not a crisis for Palestine or for any of the Palestinian factions. It is also not intended to be a way out of crisis for Fatah or any other faction. The whole issue will be easily resolved and taken care of, especially considering President Abu Mazen's determination to complete the democratic process and conduct elections as soon as possible." [25]

Little wonder that Abbas's efforts are have been increasingly dismissed by Palestinian insurgency groups. Even as the chairman meets insurgency representatives, their spokespeople deny the existence of Abbas's declaration of a Palestinian ceasefire with Israel. "The ceasefire is no longer existing but in name and form only," Hamas spokesman Sami Abu Zuhri said. "The Palestinian factions were unanimous that the resistance option is the only means to expel the Israeli occupiers from the Palestinian lands." [26]

Slowly, Abbas has come under criticism in the PA-owned press. The criticism has been oblique but clear to the Palestinian reader. One cartoon – which appears on the cover page -- leaves little doubt that the PA chairman is to blame. It shows a father and son hiding behind a bullet-ridden barricade planning their escape home using military terminology. In back of them is a poster with a picture of a man who looks similar to Abbas and underneath the words "Citizen Security." [27]



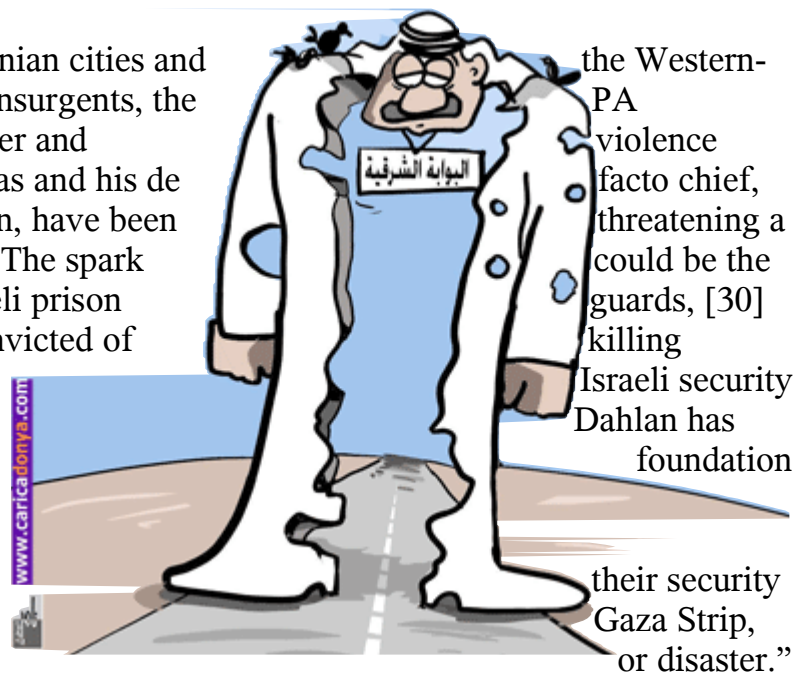
Al Quds, June 19, 2005

The Only Issue is Security

Palestinian columnists paid by the PA have made it clear that the issue of law and order marks the primary test of Abbas. Some of them warn of the destruction of Palestinian society. One columnist reports on his visit to a Gaza City market where he saw people openly trade in guns and other weaponry while PA police stand by and do nothing. The columnist makes it clear that the police were cooperating in the effort. "Security is the fabric of life," he warns. "Without this security fabric, any other kind of talk is merely words." [28]

Unlike Fatah, Hamas has been beaming confidence. The Islamic movement reacted calmly to Abbas's decision to indefinitely postpone PLC elections. Hamas prefers to wait for elections until after the Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and northern West Bank in August 2005. Then, the movement envisions winning a majority in the PLC, and a movement leader said that in such a case Hamas would join a coalition government. [29] The spokesman said Hamas was also prepared to join the Fatah-dominated Palestine Liberation Organization. In his words, "We are aiming to construct a new political system based on political partnership and mutuality to confront the challenges that threaten the future of our people."

With chaos in the streets of Palestinian cities and funded PA police in alliance with Fatah insurgents, the leadership has sought to divert rising anger and toward Israel. PA leaders, including Abbas and his de Civil Affairs Minister Mohammed Dahlan, have been new "intifada" or uprising against Israel. The spark purported destruction of a Koran by Israeli prison Israel's refusal to release Palestinians convicted of Israelis; Jewish settlements, or the wall along the West Bank. Indeed, warned that Israel was establishing the for the next intifada. [31] At the same time, Dahlan does not promise Palestinians of any improvement in after the Israeli withdrawal from the warning this move could be a "blessing [32]



Conclusion

The power vacuum in the PA has resulted in chaos with Palestinian security commanders operating private militias bolstered by Western funding and training. Abbas, incapable of imposing authority, has been increasingly dismissed as a leader and relies on the goodwill of Hamas and other Islamic opposition groups to remain as nominal head. Hamas prefers to wait until after the Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip to confront Fatah on such issues as power-sharing. The movement believes that it has the armed strength and political influence in the Arab world and in Europe [32] to force a showdown with Fatah. A violent clash between Fatah and Hamas after an Israeli withdrawal is likely.

Background: The PA Security Forces

The Palestinian Authority has maintained at least 12 security forces, including civilian police, paramilitary troops, several intelligence services and a domestic security agency. Abbas has agreed to a U.S. plan to restructure and merge the agencies into three directorates, which would be trained and equipped under Washington's supervision. In her visit to Ramallah on June 18, U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said the PA has failed to merge its security agencies and White House security envoy Gen. William Ward remained uncertain over who was in charge of what agency. Rice said the result has been a delay in U.S. efforts to bolster PA forces.



Al Hayat Al Jadida, June 13, 2005

Background: The Palestinian Dailies

The Palestinian media consist of three daily newspapers. Al Quds has by far the largest circulation of the three and is aligned but not owned by the PA. The newspaper, which in the past was attacked by PA security forces and Fatah gunmen, has been the most cautious in reporting or commenting on the internecine violence in Palestinian cities. Al Ayam and Al Hayat Al Jadida are both owned by the PA. Al Ayam is regarded as the most authoritative daily in terms of current policy in the PA. Al Hayat Al Jadida represents the more militant wing of Fatah and has promoted a reform agenda.

Notes:

1. Al Quds. June 16, 2005
2. Al Hayat Al Jadida. June 15, 2005
3. Al Quds. June 15, 2005
4. Yayha Ribah, Al Hayat Al Jadida. June 13, 2005
5. Palestinian dailies. June 16, 2005
6. Official Palestinian news agency Wafa, June 15, 2005
7. Al Hayat Al Jadida, June 16, 2005
8. Al Quds, June 16, 2005
9. Al-Mizan Center for Human Rights report, quoted in Palestinian dailies. June 15.
10. Al Hayat Al Jadida, June 16, 2005
11. Wafa news agency June 16, 2005
12. Al Hayat Al Jadida. June 14, 2005
13. Atef Saad in Al Quds. June 15, 2005
14. Al Quds, June 16, 2005
15. Al Quds, June 8, 2005
16. Deputy Prime Minister Shaath interview to Voice of Palestine. June 11, 2005
17. Al Ayam, June 12, 2005
18. Palestinian dailies. June 16, 2005
19. Al Hayat Al Jadida. June 14, 2005

-
20. Voice of Palestine. June 13, 2005.
 21. Palestinian dailies. June 13, 2005
 22. Al Hayat Al Jadida. June 15, 2005
 23. Al Ayam. June 6, 2005
 24. Al Ayam. June 19, 2005
 25. Al Hayat Al Jadida. June 6, 2005
 26. Palestinian dailies. June 16, 2005
 27. Al Hayat Al Jadida. June 16, 2005
 28. Yahya Ribah, Al Hayat Al Jadida. June 13, 2005
 29. Hamas spokesman Ismail Haniya as reported in Palestinian dailies. June 16, 2005
 30. Al Hayat Al Jadida. June 16, 2005
 31. Pg. 1 of Palestinian dailies. June 10, 2005
 32. Al Quds. June 16, 2005
 33. Hamas leader Mohammed Ghazal. Report in PA dailies. June 11, 2005